

# Shinran's Concept of *Jinen Hōni* (Naturalness) from the Viewpoint of Tanabe Hajime's Philosophy of Religion

URAI SATOSHI

SHINRAN 親鸞 (1173–1262) is perhaps best known for his thorough clarification of the notion of “other power” (*tariki* 他力), and it is his teachings concerning this that form the heart of Shin 真 Buddhism. His reflections concerning absolute other power culminate with his famous concept of *jinen hōni* 自然法爾, usually translated as “naturalness.”<sup>1</sup> This term refers to the idea that salvation is not contingent on the good deeds of an individual and that one should abandon every calculation (*hakarai* はからい) involved with doing them. In brief, it is only by entrusting ourselves entirely to Amida 阿弥陀 Buddha that salvation can be attained. Therefore, according to Shin Buddhism, salvation becomes possible only upon eradicating all attempts at achieving it through our own devices. This is the reason why Shin Buddhism can be called “the doctrine of absolute other power.”

However, what exactly is *jinen hōni*, or the state of noncalculative being? Although it is simple to put into words, it becomes perplexing under closer scrutiny. For example, if it means abandoning our calculations of what constitutes good and evil, would not Shinran's ultimate teaching consist in acting indiscriminately, merely seeking to

<sup>1</sup> To date, the concept of *jinen hōni* has been investigated through various avenues. In the second section, we will see two typical interpretations occurring in modern Japan. Here, I would like to point out the differences between the representative research in English and what I seek to accomplish in this article. Mark L. Blum introduces the concept of *jinen hōni* itself (see Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo 2011, pp. 254–55). Dennis Hirota (2011) compares Shinran's concept of *jinen* with Martin Heidegger's *phusis*, which can also be translated as “nature,” and clarifies the overlaps and differences between the two, thereby succeeding in putting *jinen* on the map of Western thought. Bret W. Davis (2014) tries to overcome the dichotomy of self power and Zen 禪 on the one hand and other power and Shin Buddhism on the other by using the common concept of naturalness, that is, for Zen “one's true self” and for Shin *jinen*, by referring to various thinkers of both schools. As of yet, no attempt has been made to discuss the relationship between *jinen hōni*, the acts of individuals, and society. In this regard, I believe this article can make a novel contribution to the further clarification of this concept.

satisfy our desires without consideration for others? Alternatively, if *jinen hōni* consists in being devoid of any intention, would the salvation of Shin Buddhism not be akin to a state of stupefaction devoid of thinking? Does it refer to our state of mind, or is it related to our actions? When we try to understand it along any of these lines, the significance of *jinen hōni* seems to become impossible to discern, as if it were hidden from view.

Naturally, the above perplexities have not gone unnoticed by Shin Buddhist scholars, who have developed elaborate classifications of the term *jinen*.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this seemingly radical doctrine has drawn much interest in modern Japan among non-Shin Buddhists as well. In this article, we will elaborate on the concept of *jinen hōni* in light of the philosophy of religion of Tanabe Hajime 田辺元 (1885–1962), who was not affiliated with the Shin Buddhist sect. Although he shared the common understanding of *jinen hōni* as premised on “leaving everything to Other-power,”<sup>3</sup> he interpreted this concept within his own, original philosophical framework.

This article aims to bridge the distance between the *noncalculative* state of *jinen hōni* and we who *calculate* the meaning of this term. For this purpose, we will first look at Shinran’s original albeit somewhat abstruse account of *jinen hōni*. Second, we will examine the accounts of Soga Ryōjin 曾我量深 (1875–1971) and Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō 鈴木大拙貞太郎 (1870–1966), more commonly known as D. T. Suzuki, whose writings formed the conventional understanding of *jinen hōni* in modern Japan. In the last part, we will briefly touch upon Tanabe Hajime’s philosophy and his somewhat unconventional interpretation of *jinen hōni*.

## THE CONCEPT OF *JINEN HŌNI* IN SHINRAN

Let us begin with a presentation of *jinen hōni* in Shinran’s own words:

Concerning *jinen* [in the phrase *jinen hōni*]:

*Ji* means “of itself”—not through the practitioner’s calculation. It signifies being made so.

*Nen* means “to be made so”—it is not through the practitioner’s calculation; it is through the working of the Tathāgata’s Vow.

Concerning *hōni*:

*Hōni* signifies being made so through the working of the Tathāgata’s Vow. It is the working of the Vow where there is no room for calculation

<sup>2</sup> We refer here to the general subdivision into *ganriki jinen* 願力自然, *gōdō jinen* 業道自然, and *mui jinen* 無為自然 (see Shinshū Shinjiten Hensankai 1983, p. 221), which we will encounter in the second section. Note that the meaning of the term *jinen* in this subdivision has many aspects as well. For this reason, such classification is necessary.

<sup>3</sup> PM, p. 262.

on the part of the practitioner. Know, therefore, that in Other Power, no working is true working.

*Jinen* signifies being made so from the very beginning. Amida's Vow is, from the very beginning, designed to bring each of us to entrust ourselves to it—saying “Namu-amida-butsu”—and to receive us into the Pure Land; none of this is through our calculation. Thus, there is no room for the practitioner to be concerned about being good or evil. This is the meaning of *jinen*, as I have been taught.

As the essential purport of the Vow, Amida vowed to bring us all to become the supreme Buddha. The supreme Buddha is formless, and because of being formless, it is called *jinen*. Buddha, when appearing with form, is not called supreme nirvana. In order to make it known that the supreme Buddha is formless, the name Amida Buddha is expressly used; so I have been taught. Amida Buddha fulfills the purpose of making us know the significance of *jinen*.

After we have realized this, we should not be forever talking about *jinen*. If we continuously discuss *jinen*, that no working is true working will again become a problem of working. It is a matter of inconceivable Buddha-wisdom.

(Shōka 正嘉 2 [1258], Twelfth month, 14th day)

Gutoku Shinran  
Written at age 86.<sup>4</sup>

This passage clarifies the concrete aspect of the Buddhist path as realized by Amida Buddha, who actualizes the salvation of all sentient beings by taking them up in the stream that leads to nirvana. Salvation is realized when sentient beings dive into that stream, abandoning their judgment of good or evil and their artificial calculation. “No working is true working” means that it is in accordance with Amida's calculation that sentient beings do not engage in artificial calculation.<sup>5</sup> As Shinran added (see above),

<sup>4</sup> CWS, vol.1, p. 530; translation modified. The concept of *jinen hōni* is found in two of Shinran's later works. The first, presented here, is well known from the fifth letter of *Mattōshō* 末灯鈔 (hereafter, *Lamp for the Latter Ages*), which many scholars have referred to. The second, which Terakawa (1985) and Kakehashi (2011, 2012) relied on, is *Gyakutoku myōgō jinen hōni gosho* 獲得名号自然法爾御書, which we do not have an English translation of, although the passage included in the *Shōzōmatsu wasan* 正像末和讚 (*Hymns of the Dharma Ages*, CWS, vol.1, pp. 427–28) is very similar. They relied on this text because they considered *jinen hōni* to be a concrete aspect of the Buddhist path cultivated by those who have realized the Name of Amida Buddha. However, we cite from the fifth letter of *Lamp for the Latter Ages* because Tanabe, as a philosopher, did not regard the Name of Amida as an important moment in his philosophy of religion.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the interpretation presented in this article, Taya (1992, pp. 81–91) interprets “no working is true working” as the “no-calculation is true teaching” of Shin Buddhism. We have adopted

“we should not be forever talking about *jinen*. If we continuously discuss *jinen*, that no working is true working will again become a problem of working.” Thus, the concrete meaning of *jinen hōni* is inconceivable and exceeds our comprehension.

However, even accepting that “we should not be forever talking about” *jinen hōni*, we cannot help being somewhat puzzled by the above passage. Although abandoning our calculations to be guided by Amida’s calculation seems to be extremely simple on paper, its simplicity makes it, in fact, incredibly challenging in practice. That is, when we *try to* attain *jinen hōni* or to entrust ourselves to Amida, we are confronted internally by the calculated intent of abandoning our calculations. In other words, if we *try to* attain *jinen hōni*, we must somehow overcome *our calculation* of trying *not to calculate*. At that very moment, we are deprived of *jinen hōni*. Thus, it seems that *jinen hōni* is an impracticable goal. Herein lies the difficulty of *jinen hōni*. D. T. Suzuki discusses this difficulty as follows:

Why *jinen hōni*, *jisshō jini* (実性自爾) [i.e., suchness lies in something being just as it is], or again, “the state of being just as we are” (*aru ga mama no sugata* あるがままの姿) are possible for us is a serious problem in philosophy. Still, people who actually pursue the study of Zen 禪 are unconcerned about the logical postulate. They express it just because they actually experience it.<sup>6</sup>

Suzuki claims that the difficulty mentioned above is only for scholars, not for Buddhist practitioners. That is, we do not have to discuss it: we must simply attain it. How, then, can Buddhist practitioners overcome their calculations? The answer “they just attain it” merely ignores this difficulty since it does not explain how a person can become a practitioner in the first place. If we simply leave it at that, then *jinen hōni* becomes a nonstarter in terms of both theory and practice.

#### THE INTERPRETATION OF *JINEN HŌNI* IN MODERN JAPAN

The concept of *jinen hōni* has gained much attention in modern Japan.<sup>7</sup> This section will briefly introduce two conventional understandings of *jinen hōni* provided by the Shin Buddhist scholar Soga Ryōjin and the Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki, both of whom are already well known on the international scene. In doing so, it will help to highlight the characteristics of Tanabe Hajime’s view of *jinen hōni*.

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a different interpretation, as the point of view of the present article is that what is realized in *jinen hōni* is the working of the Absolute.

<sup>6</sup> SDZ, vol. 2, p. 407. As we will see in the next section, Suzuki conceives of *jinen hōni* as the ideal state of all Buddhists, not only those of the Shin denomination. Here, he uses *jinen hōni*, *jisshō jini*, and “the state of being just as we are” in the same sense.

<sup>7</sup> In this article, we do not deal with Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945), who also referred to *jinen hōni* during his last years. For further details, see Itabashi 2008, pp. 226–57, 322–64.

*Soga Ryōjin*

Soga is undeniably the most influential scholar of the Ōtani sect of Shin Buddhism in the modern age.<sup>8</sup> His influence is still dominant in this sect. The word *jinen hōni* appears more than one hundred times in his *Selected Works*,<sup>9</sup> but he for the most part used the term *jinen hōni* consistently in a univocal sense. The following passage concerning *jinen* can be considered representative:

Through the path of *ganriki jinen* 願力自然 [i.e., the path laid out by the natural working of the Vow's power], we overcome *gōdō jinen* 業道自然 [i.e., the natural working of karma], turning toward and entering *mui jinen* 無為自然 [i.e., the realm of nirvana]. Therefore, in short, the natural working of the Vow's power is *vital in Shin Buddhism*.<sup>10</sup>

Soga refers to the traditional classification of *jinen* as three types: *mui jinen*, *gōdō jinen*, and *ganriki jinen*. *Mui jinen* means the state of nirvana itself; *gōdō jinen* refers to the natural working of the laws of karmic causation; *ganriki jinen* means the natural working of the power of Amida Buddha's Vow. Here, Soga uses these three concepts of *jinen* to show the process by which we are liberated from suffering and attain the realm of nirvana. That is, we are suffering from the causality of karma in this world, and it is only when we reach nirvana that we are liberated from this suffering. The power of the Vow of Amida Buddha is what makes emancipation from this suffering possible. Thus, Soga maintained that *ganriki jinen* is of the utmost importance in Shin Buddhism. He explains it as follows:

The phrase [from the *Tannishō* 歎異抄] “entrust oneself to the Primal Vow and recite the *nenbutsu* 念仏” means that when we recite the *nenbutsu*, we do not have to put all our energy into doing it, but that the *nenbutsu* comes out naturally since the *nenbutsu* is the practice that Amida Buddha selected. We do not recite it by our power, but the power of the *nenbutsu* itself naturally [i.e., *jinen hōni*] banishes our delusions. Thus, the *nenbutsu* is classified as “the Dharma to be practiced” (*shogyō no hō* 所行の法). This is the meaning of [the phrase] “one who entrusts oneself to the Primal Vow and recites the *nenbutsu* attains Buddhahood” [found in the *Tannishō*].<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Two introductions to his thought already exist in English (Blum and Rhodes 2011, Van Bragt 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Soga Ryōjin Senshū Kankōkai 1970–72.

<sup>10</sup> Soga 2015, p. 71; emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> Soga Ryōjin Senshū Kankōkai 1970–72, vol. 6, p. 277.

Soga's interpretation of *jinen hōni* can be summed up as follows. When we attain faith in the Vow of Amida, the unfathomable power of the Name of Amida itself leads us spontaneously to nirvana. His interpretation accords with the text *On Jinen hōni*,<sup>12</sup> in which Shinran discussed *jinen hōni* in terms of the *nenbutsu*, that is, reciting the Name of Amida, thus opening the path for sentient beings to realize buddhahood naturally. This idea deserves to be called "absolute other power." According to Soga, when we have faith in the Primal Vow, the utterance of the *nenbutsu* comes naturally from our mouths by means of the unfathomable power of Amida's Vow. That is, Amida makes us recite the *nenbutsu*.

*D. T. Suzuki*

D. T. Suzuki developed his ideas by freely incorporating terms from various Buddhist sects, with a tendency to repeatedly use terms he preferred. *Jinen hōni* is one such term. Suzuki mentioned *jinen hōni* already in the 1920s<sup>13</sup> but began to use it more frequently in the 1940s, and even more so in his later works. His take on *jinen hōni* resembles that of Soga's in that he links this concept to spontaneity. However, Suzuki's account diverges, since he views Shinran's teachings through the lens of Zen Buddhism:

We call this notion of *jinen hōni* "just as it is" (*sono mama* そのまま). When the concept of *tathatā* was brought to Japan, it came to be expressed by the phrase "just as it is." When a pine tree stays "just as it is," the pine tree is free to be a pine tree. We say, "a pine tree grows [only] into a pine tree, and a pine tree cannot become a bamboo," but from a pine tree's point of view, what is there to prevent a pine tree from becoming a pine tree? If we tell a pine tree to become a bamboo, it will tell us that it is not that it *cannot* become that, but that it *just does not* become that.<sup>14</sup>

Suzuki understood *jinen hōni* as a state of "just as it is" or "just as we are"<sup>15</sup>—a condition in which the original state of being of our true self has been activated.<sup>16</sup> This point is illustrated by the famous allegory of the pine tree and the bamboo tree, which can be understood in terms of the relation between calculation and *jinen hōni*. Here, he uses *jinen hōni*, "just as it is," and spontaneity in the same sense. It could be

<sup>12</sup> CWS, vol. 1, p. 530.

<sup>13</sup> For example, SDZ, vol. 28, p. 262.

<sup>14</sup> SDZ, vol. 6, p. 355.

<sup>15</sup> SDZ, vol. 28, p. 262.

<sup>16</sup> SDZ, vol. 26, p. 375. Of course, there are also instances in which Suzuki used this term with the meaning of "the natural working of the Vow's power," as Soga did. However, the characteristic usage of the term by Suzuki is the one pointed out here. See, for example, SDZ, vol. 6, p. 355.

argued that just as the pine tree cannot become a bamboo tree, the practitioner cannot deliberately attain the spontaneous state of *jinen hōni*. According to Suzuki, the very aspiration of becoming something other than ourselves is what obstructs our attainment of *jinen hōni*. The difficulty lies in misconstruing *jinen hōni* as an *outward* state of spontaneity. Suzuki's solution to the paradox of attaining *jinen hōni* consists in the realization that true spontaneity is the capacity of realizing one's own nature, which can be achieved without any calculation toward doing so. In other words, a pine tree does not have to calculate to become a pine tree. On the other hand, if a pine tree aspires to turn into a bamboo tree, then it cannot realize its true nature as a pine tree.

The fact that Suzuki speaks of "attaining *jinen hōni*"<sup>17</sup> suggests that it is a state that can be achieved by realizing the ideal of mindlessness as expounded in Zen Buddhism. Suzuki held that, through such a state, a great activity that lies within our true self is realized—something that he indicated using expressions such as the "true man without rank"<sup>18</sup> from *The Record of Linji* and the "great function appears without abiding by fixed principles"<sup>19</sup> from the *Blue Cliff Record*. That which is realized by attaining *jinen hōni* is the life of spontaneity and creativity called the "*samadhi* of play" (*yuge zanmai* 遊戯三昧).

#### TANABE HAJIME'S PHILOSOPHY AND *JINEN HŌNI*

In the above sections, we briefly reviewed the understanding of *jinen hōni* of two representative Buddhist scholars. To summarize, Soga conceived of *jinen hōni* as the aspect of Buddhism in which Amida's Name opens the path to salvation for all sentient beings. Suzuki linked this notion with the Zen ideal of attaining a state of mindlessness, whereby spontaneous activity begins to emerge from our true selves. In other words, by using the term *jinen hōni*, Soga showed how Amida Buddha leads us, while Suzuki elaborated on the aspect of creative activity that springs from our true selves.

Although Shin Buddhism influenced Tanabe Hajime's interpretation of *jinen hōni*, he had an essentially different understanding of what it means to attain it. This difference originates in Tanabe's understanding of the relation between religion and ethics. He held that the ideals of religion and ethics (i.e., salvation and social reform) are inseparable. He connected *jinen hōni* to Shinran's concept of *gensō ekō* 還相回向—"Amida's directing of virtue for our return to this world"<sup>20</sup>—and interpreted the latter as the practice of benefiting others that is realized within ourselves. Thus, for Tanabe, *jinen hōni* is a necessary condition for the reformation of society. As a result, Tanabe's

<sup>17</sup> SDZ, vol. 7, p. 222.

<sup>18</sup> Kirchner 2009, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Cleary 1998, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> CWS, vol. 1, p. 301.

interpretation of *jinen hōni* has the following two characteristics. One is his explanation of it in terms of its relevance for society and ethics. The other is his view of *jinen hōni* not merely as the working of absolute other power, nor as that of the true self, but as a compound of other power and self power.

*Tanabe Hajime's Philosophy and Shin Buddhism*

Before discussing his understanding of *jinen hōni*, I will briefly introduce the philosopher Tanabe Hajime. Together with Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945), he is regarded as the cofounder of the so-called Kyoto school. The philosophy of the Kyoto school emerged as a synthesis of Western philosophy and Japanese Buddhism (especially that of the Shin and Zen schools). Having acquired a deep understanding of Western philosophy, Nishida, Tanabe, and their disciples employed its concepts together with Buddhist ideas such as “nothingness” (*mu* 無) and “emptiness” (*kū* 空) to develop their philosophies.

Tanabe's writings spanned the period from 1910 to 1961 and dealt with issues in a vast range of academic disciplines. However, his interest was always centered on knowing the Absolute. In order to know the Absolute, Tanabe's early philosophy borrowed the concepts of “intuition” and “experience” from Nishida's philosophy. In other words, Tanabe believed that one could know the Absolute by uniting oneself with it. After 1930, however, he adopted dialectics as his philosophical method for knowing the Absolute. From that point on, his philosophy was firmly based on dialectics. In other words, his social philosophy, which he worked on in the mid-1930s and early 1940s and which he called the “logic of species” (*shu no ronri* 種の論理); his philosophy of religion, which he worked on from the end of the Second World War and which he called “metanoetics” (*zangedō* 懺悔道); and his later philosophy of religion, which he called “philosophy of death” (*shi no tetsugaku* 死の哲学), were all focused on attaining knowledge of the Absolute through dialectics.

Among these philosophical positions, the influence of Shinran and Soga are most noticeable in the development of Tanabe's notion of metanoetics. It was when he was developing this aspect of his philosophy that the concept of *jinen hōni* appeared as a technical term in Tanabe's thought. The driving force leading to Tanabe's notion of metanoetics was the belief that we are compelled to know the Absolute but cannot attain this knowledge by ourselves. To resolve this, Tanabe relied on the teaching of Shinran and his most formidable interpreter, Soga. Through their doctrines—which held that no matter how powerless one might be, one will be saved by the other power of the Absolute—Tanabe discovered the extremely narrow way that leads to the knowledge of the Absolute that we are unable to know by ourselves. That is, he interpreted their doctrines from the perspective of knowing the Absolute. In other words,



he recognized that in order for us to know the Absolute, the Absolute must *come to us* through other power. Thus, he developed the idea of knowing the Absolute in philosophy by employing the Shin Buddhist discourse concerning salvation. Because of this relationship between philosophy and Shin Buddhism, he referred to metanoetics as “the philosophy of Other-power.”<sup>21</sup>

Then, what is the relationship between knowing the Absolute in metanoetics and Shin Buddhism? In metanoetics, we can know the Absolute only when we are clearly aware of our inability to think or act following self power—which is referred to in Shin Buddhism as the “profound insight into our nature” (*ki no jinshin* 機の深信). It is at this moment that the power of the Absolute comes into play. Only at that moment, according to Tanabe, the Absolute momentarily comes to us, thereby allowing us to recognize it. It is only through that event that we are allowed to know the Absolute—which corresponds to the attainment of wisdom (*prajñā*) in Buddhism or, in the words used in the hymns of Shinran, the “wisdom of *shinjin*” 信心 (literally “faith-heart”).<sup>22</sup> In the self-awareness of our thorough powerlessness, we helpless human beings can know the Absolute. Herein lies the novel philosophical standpoint of metanoetics, a standpoint that, adopting the words of Shinran, Tanabe called “the philosophy of foolish and ordinary people.”<sup>23</sup> For this reason, Tanabe stated that “Shinran is truly the master and guide of my philosophy.”<sup>24</sup>

#### *Tanabe on Attaining Jinen Hōni*

As mentioned in the previous section, Tanabe believed that the ethical and religious dimensions are intimately related. Specifically, this means that the Absolute makes the individual capable of genuine moral action. This view became especially prominent after the publication of *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (1946), which was greatly influenced by Shin Buddhism. In particular, Tanabe interpreted Shinran’s concept of great practice (*daigyō* 大行)<sup>25</sup> in terms of the action of the Absolute (hereafter, called Action). Thus, it would seem that he simply paraphrased with philosophical terminology the conventional understanding of *jinen hōni* and what it means to attain it. This, however, is not the case. As we will see in this section, Tanabe argues that *jinen hōni* can only

<sup>21</sup> PM, p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> CWS, vol. 1, p. 407.

<sup>23</sup> THZ, vol. 9, pp. 9, 29.

<sup>24</sup> PM, p. 399.

<sup>25</sup> Shinran interprets true practice in Pure Land Buddhism as the practice of the buddhas, not of humans. In other words, the true practice of *nenbutsu* is the praise of Amida Buddha’s Name by other buddhas. We can only listen to them. Therefore, as Soga insisted (see above), it is that the *nenbutsu* comes out of our mouths *spontaneously*, or, in other words, Amida *makes us recite* the *nenbutsu*; it is not that we recite it by *our own efforts*.

be attained by becoming aware of the futility of self power. In Tanabe's terminology, Action becomes manifest at the limits of individual action. However, the only way to know these limits is by engaging with society until we reach concrete moral dilemmas that cannot be solved by the efforts of our own reasoning.

The concept of *jinen hōni* appeared in metanoetics in relation to individual action that aims at social improvement. Tanabe's concern with how individuals can improve society dates back to the development of his social philosophy in 1934. This theme was carried over into his later philosophy of religion. Throughout, the underlying idea of Tanabe's philosophy was that the only means of improving society is through individual action. But if so, why was it necessary to bring up the religious term *jinen hōni*? In order to explain this, we must clarify the fundamental standpoint of metanoetics: that moral action calls for knowledge of the Absolute.

Needless to say, since we have only limited abilities, we cannot know and do everything. We can only hope to increase our practical knowledge gradually and often through failure. Moral philosophy is full of thought experiments that portray situations where failure seems inevitable, but failing to act is not an option. To give an extreme example, suppose that you find yourself in a situation where your parents are drowning in front of you. If you save your father, your mother will die, and vice versa. What is the "right" thing to do? All things being equal, there simply is no morally justifiable course of action between the two available options. And yet, failure to take action would cause the greatest amount of harm. That is, one is compelled to act without knowing the correct course of action.

Fortunately, we are seldom, if ever, confronted with such textbook examples of moral dilemmas. However, the difference between such extreme dilemmas and the choices we face in our everyday lives might be due to mere ignorance of the causal chain of events. Consider the more familiar example of university entrance exams. If I pass the exam, someone will fail because of my success, and I will have no idea about the actual outcome this will have for that person or society in general. But this would also be true if I were to give up my aspirations for the compassion of others. It is quite plausible that any such decision would entail a textbook example of a moral dilemma, *if I only knew the consequences*. This is all the truer if we consider the chain of events involved in the production of commodities we purchase on a daily basis and their ecological impact. Whenever we purchase delicious food or high-quality products at a lower-than-average price, there is usually someone in the chain of production who has been exploited for their labor or profit. The same is true for environmental damage. In both cases, we make choices for our own benefit at the expense of others.

Of course, we can choose relatively good deeds by being aware of such situations, increasing our knowledge, and identifying more ethical actions. Even if we cannot make others pass the entrance exam instead of ourselves, we can make choices that

entail less suffering (economic and labor exploitation) in each of our daily decisions. But they are only choices that produce *less* suffering. The society we live in is an enormous mechanism, and no matter how much we know about it, our actions are always accompanied by suffering that cannot be foreseen. In short, when we act in society, we are always sacrificing something that we cannot see. No matter which choice we make, there will always be a sacrifice. In other words, there is no other way but to choose the one with relatively less suffering (i.e., the less sinful option). No matter which alternative we choose, there is always evil attached to it. That is, we are fundamentally evil, and we are sinful (this is Tanabe's interpretation of Kant and Schelling's concept of "radical evil").<sup>26</sup> Looking at it from another angle, since we are finite and limited, we cannot know what is absolutely right or do anything *absolutely right*. Thus, we are fundamentally ignorant. That is why Tanabe says, "not only am I powerless in practice, but I also feel deeply powerless in knowledge."<sup>27</sup>

However, no matter how ignorant we are and how much we harm others, we still must live in society. If we wish to avoid making sacrifices while living in society, there would be no other way but to commit suicide right now. Even if we leave society and go into hiding in the mountains, as long as we have a body, we must continue to take the lives of animals and plants. Thus, no matter how hard we try, what is possible for us is a "better action" and not an "absolutely right action." This is the limit of what we can achieve by our self power, that is, ethical radicalization and expansion of knowledge. Thus, moral conduct is necessarily related to knowledge of the practical outcomes of our decisions.

It is precisely for such reasons that Tanabe is concerned with knowledge of the Absolute. The mere fact that we are ignorant of the distant outcomes of our actions does not diminish the actual harm that our actions introduce into this world. Thus, it is our moral duty to act to the best of our knowledge. To use Shinran's terminology, Tanabe believes that it is our moral duty to act within the scope of self power until we reach its limits. Action within this scope is relative in two senses. As already established, it is relative to our knowledge of the outcomes. However, it is also relative with respect to the actual outcomes since we will always inflict some degree of harm on others, even if we believe that it is for the sake of the greater good. In other words, there is always a degree of evil that accompanies our behavior.

According to Tanabe's philosophy, just as our ignorance of outcomes does not diminish the induced harm, the awareness of our fundamentally evil nature does not absolve us from the duty of overcoming our nature. Thus, in order to reduce the evil within, we must increase the scope of our knowledge of practical outcomes. However,

<sup>26</sup>Schelling 1997.

<sup>27</sup>Z, p. 16.

we will constantly be confronted with situations where we find ourselves at a moral impasse, not knowing the “better” course of action. In such cases, we fall into a predicament where we are overwhelmed with the feeling of powerlessness. Tanabe names this lament lurking at the bottom of our awareness of powerlessness as “repentance” (*zange* 懺悔). Repentance calls for a being of a higher order than ourselves, a savior both in practice and knowledge. In other words, we cannot but ask for the Absolute as the one who knows “what is absolutely right.” Such an Absolute is, in the words of Shin Buddhism, Amida Buddha with infinite wisdom.

The demand for the Absolute is also a call for forgiveness for our fundamentally evil nature. Herein lies another aspect of the Absolute: it is Amida Buddha with infinite compassion as depicted in Shin Buddhism. In this relationship with the savior, Tanabe suggests that we do not acquire absolute knowledge by striving to recognize what is right by ourselves but by being granted it by the Absolute. The acquisition of absolute knowledge in the predicament of repentance and the forgiveness of sins is what Tanabe means by “salvation” in his metanoetics (Tanabe calls this “death and resurrection” [*shi fukkatsu* 死復活], a theme he elaborates on as follows):

Although the sin inevitably produced by one’s action is always condemned from an ethical viewpoint, it is always forgiven by the boundlessness of repentance from a religious viewpoint. Hence consciousness of the forgiveness of one’s sinfulness returns one to the relative. Filled with gratitude, one is brought back to “the action of no-action” that establishes the relationship of the relative to the relative. In this way, repentance functions as a mediating force through which the evil of sin, without disappearing, is transformed into the bliss of forgiveness and salvation grounded in absolute nothingness [i.e., the Absolute in Tanabe’s philosophy]. This is the self-mediation of the Absolute in and through the relative, for which “metanoetics,” as the self-awareness of this self-mediation, provides absolute knowledge. This is why the true path of philosophy is to be sought in “metanoetics.”<sup>28</sup>

The sins that result from our finitude and ignorance remain transgressions in the ethical sense, but in the religious sense of sin, they are forgiven by the Absolute. Here, the person who had been suffering from ignorance and sin, and thus was in repentance, cannot help but be grateful to the being who forgave their sins and saved them from condemnation (i.e., the Absolute, which Tanabe describes here as absolute nothingness). Accordingly, Tanabe believes that the person will practice gratitude toward the Absolute, and upon looking back at their salvation, they will realize that their ignorance and sin-

<sup>28</sup> PM, p. 101; translation modified.

ful actions were necessary for encountering the Absolute (which Tanabe describes as a “mediating force”).<sup>29</sup> Tanabe thinks that there is an encounter with the Absolute in sin, and in this encounter, the Absolute dwells within one’s self. This indwelling Absolute is the basis of absolute knowledge.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the arrival of the Absolute within the self amid repentance enables the self to transcend the scope of “better knowledge” and acquire “absolute knowledge.” The acquisition of absolute knowledge that penetrates the scope of individual knowledge is exactly what Tanabe means by *jinen hōni*:

The transcendent becomes immanent. . . . Action no longer belongs to the self in the usual sense of carrying on one’s own work according to one’s own plan. Instead, a higher spontaneity is made manifest—we may call it “transcendent facticity” or “absolute actuality”—wherein the plans and doings of the self are mediated, subsumed, and negated. This is “naturalness” (*jinen hōni*) in Shinran’s sense of the term, an “action of no-action” or activity without an acting self in which action ceases to be merely the doing of the self.<sup>31</sup>

#### *The Novelty of Tanabe’s Account*

In the previous section, we saw that Tanabe’s interpretation of *jinen hōni* conforms to the conventional sense of spontaneous action that is mediated by the higher-order being of Amida Buddha. However, his understanding of what it means to attain *jinen hōni* is highly original. First, let us consider how this account helps to resolve the paradox of attaining *jinen hōni*. To recall, the paradoxical nature of *jinen hōni* as a religious ideal consists in the inability to avoid deliberately intending to attain it. Tanabe’s philosophical interpretation of the role of *jinen hōni* as the moment of mediation between the immanence of social practices and the transcendence of religious salvation offers a fascinating solution to this paradox. In a sense, Tanabe turns things around to show that the thorough exercise of self-reliance is an impracticable ideal since it ultimately lands us in moral dilemmas that cannot be solved by our own efforts. Thus, even if we understand *jinen hōni* as an ideal to be realized through religious practice, it is a higher-order ideal that can be achieved only by exhausting our reason and becoming aware of our powerlessness:

“Everything is good just as it is” is not affirmation without mediation, but affirmation mediated by negation in the sense that everything is

<sup>29</sup> Mediation is the key concept in his philosophy from the 1930s onward and is the core of his dialectic. This concept means that a thing is in a reciprocal relation of influence with other things.

<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere, I have discussed the relationship between faith and knowledge in Tanabe’s thought. For details, see Urai 2020a.

<sup>31</sup> PM, p. 171; translation modified.

transformed and restored into a new form of differentiation through absolute negation. Thus, the standpoint of naturalness wherein everything is allowed to be just as it is does not mean “naturalness” or “as such” in the ordinary sense. For us, it means the sweat and blood of religious discipline. Only one who has really attempted to “be just as one is” truly knows how difficult a task that is. Many of a mind so shameless and indolent as never to have exerted themselves to seek the good and avoid evil, many who have not wrestled with moral torment employ the terms “absolute nondifferentiation” or “naturalness” in order to justify themselves in staying just as they are and attributing their state to the grace of Other-power. They misuse the terms to defend an indolent, tranquil life by displacing the notion of “naturalness” from its rightful locus in the realm of absolute nothingness [the Absolute], where it is understood as being *beyond* ethics, to a new location *beneath* ethics. And that is surely the most frightful damage that can be inflicted on religion. “Naturalness” or the state of things “just as they are” is not a simple given but a goal toward which one must strive through the mediation of self-negation. The real dialectic here functions in virtue of the fact that being “just as one is” does not imply resting content with one’s present state but rather exerting oneself to become “natural.”<sup>32</sup>

The above passage has several important and interrelated philosophical implications. First, Tanabe clearly differentiates between two senses of *jinen hōni*: “just as we are” as the immediate and “just as we are” as mediated by the Absolute. He clearly rejects the interpretation of *jinen hōni* as an immediate state of naturalness and, by extension, the religious goal of bypassing conscious calculation and returning to our “true selves.” For the purposes of this article, it is important to note that this understanding enters into paradoxical territory. What Tanabe offers is a higher-order view of *jinen hōni* as a goal that is achieved through the failure of our calculations at moral conduct. This is what Tanabe means by “affirmation mediated by negation.” That is, if we are to attempt to “be just as we are” in Tanabe’s higher-order, or “mediated,” sense, we must first grapple with the moral torment precipitated within us by the lower-order concrete situations of everyday life. Thus, reaching the true state of “just as we are” is the consequence of “the sweat and blood of religious discipline.”<sup>33</sup> The theoretical significance of Tanabe’s interpretation is that the paradox of attaining *jinen hōni* can be avoided if we introduce a hierarchy of goals with the religious goal of attaining *jinen hōni* occupying a place over and above the lower-order ethical goals.

<sup>32</sup> PM, pp. 263–64.

<sup>33</sup> PM, p. 263.

Second, this hierarchical structure has philosophical implications for the relationship between the domains of ethics and religion. At the beginning of this article, we noted the concern of whether Shinran's teaching would result in our seeking to satisfy our desires without consideration for others. After all, it is impossible to act morally without calculating the consequences of one's actions. Tanabe clearly has this in mind when he criticizes those who reverse the order of the hierarchy by displacing *jinen hōni* to a position beneath the domain of ethics. As a consequence, "leaving everything to Other-power"<sup>34</sup> does not mean for Tanabe hedonistic self-indulgence or a nihilistic stupor devoid of any intention. On the contrary, Tanabe considered such an understanding of "just as we are" to be "the most frightful damage that can be inflicted on religion."<sup>35</sup>

We can explain *jinen hōni* through the intermediary relationship between ethics and religion in the following manner: When a system of ethics, which reason has conceived as a system of logic, continues to be altered in the course of encountering unmanageable issues, finally encountering contradictions that cannot be resolved no matter how much the system is altered, reason realizes that it must extend itself beyond its own limits. In other words, reason realizes that a domain exists out of the range it can conceive of, a domain that in Shin Buddhism is referred to as "inconceivable" (*fukashigi* 不可思議). Suppose we define such a domain as the religious dimension that connects with the Absolute. In that case, it is within this religious domain that reason, having reached the very limits of ethics, must seek a solution. Thus, for an ethical system to remain rational, it must necessarily recognize a religious dimension, which constitutes the "unavoidable destiny of reason."<sup>36</sup> Thereby, Tanabe regarded the Absolute as the principle of "absolute transformation of death and resurrection."<sup>37</sup>

Of course, even though this is the unavoidable destiny of reason, reason cannot access by its own power what lies beyond its limits. Due to the existence of something outside itself, reason comes to recognize that it is internally incomplete; by continuing to expand it, only those "whose reason was truly exerted"<sup>38</sup> are at last mediated by the domain of the inconceivable. Therefore, the domain of the inconceivable is not aloof from that of reason. Rather, reason must continuously exert itself at all times until it reaches repentance. Therefore, Tanabe regarded the Absolute as "the principle that lies

<sup>34</sup> PM, p. 262.

<sup>35</sup> For this reason, Tanabe stated that "the joy of salvation is bound as closely to the grief of repentance as light is to shadow" (PM, p. 92; translation modified). In other words, the people who have not experienced repentance yet and are merely satisfying their idleness cannot reach salvation in Shin Buddhism.

<sup>36</sup> PM, p. 124; translation modified.

<sup>37</sup> PM, p. 205.

<sup>38</sup> THZ, vol. 9, p. 149.

at the bottom of actuality”<sup>39</sup> and cannot be grasped by reason. He identified repentance as “such a principle making its appearance within me.”<sup>40</sup>

In this way, because repentance consists in the Absolute operating “*on me* from *within me*,”<sup>41</sup> Tanabe explained that repentance “by its very essence, cannot be the work of the mere self-power of relative beings.”<sup>42</sup> It is not the self that repents, but the Absolute that *makes it repent*. In terms of the relationship between the Absolute and us, the Absolute, which has always been working outside of us, directs us toward repentance by leading our reason to collapse. One could say that repentance is the moment when the relative being meets the Absolute, which has been continuously working on it, and recognizes this working for the first time so that they enter into a relationship in which they mediate each other. Therefore, from the point of view of the repenting relative being, this intermediation means that the relative being repents due to its being inclined toward repentance. For this reason, Tanabe expresses his standpoint as follows:

The two completely opposite and contradictory demands that are, on the one hand, the ethics that can become the basis of a rigorous historical practice that we can venture into only at the risk of our own life and, on the other hand, the *samādhi* of transcendent emancipation occurring as we contemplate our present life as empty and provisional, while being completely independent of each other, are made persistently inseparable through mediation.<sup>43</sup>

In this passage lies the fundamental standpoint of Tanabe’s philosophy of religion. It is the standpoint where ethics (“that can become the basis of a rigorous historical practice that we can venture into only at the risk of our own life”) and religion (“*samadhi* of transcendent emancipation”) must be mediated by each other. In this case, repentance appears as an aspect of a system of ethics on which can lie “a rigorous historical practice.” On the reverse side of this system of ethics always lies *jinen hōni*, in the form of “the *samādhi* of transcendent emancipation occurring as we contemplate our present life as empty and provisional.”

This shows that Tanabe’s idea of *jinen hōni* for us ordinary people does not advocate “doing nothing” in the name of “absolute other power” but rather commits us to engage with society through the Action of the Absolute. Tanabe referred to the Action that occurs in *jinen hōni* with the term *gensō ekō*, which he interpreted as the Absolute

<sup>39</sup> Z, p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> Z, p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> Z, p. 20; emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> PM, p. 388.

<sup>43</sup> THZ, vol. 11, p. 479.



turning its great compassion toward others through beings who have repented. In other words, for Tanabe, the Action of *jinen hōni* is *our gensō ekō*. Here lies Tanabe's original understanding of Pure Land Buddhism in which the concepts of *jinen hōni* and *gensō ekō* are combined with a heavy emphasis on the latter.

Of course, as we have seen until now, this Action, which Tanabe also referred to as the “action of no-action,” is not an action that we perform consciously, but rather something that allows us to realize the working of the Absolute on us. Again, the essence of this Action is such that it allows us to propagate the great compassion of the Absolute in the society in which we live. For this reason, even if Tanabe talked about “absolute other power,” he used the expressions “self power qua other power” (*jiriki soku tariki* 自力即他力) and “other power qua self power” (*tariki soku jiriki* 他力即自力), emphasizing the importance of the mediation operating on both sides—not only on that of the Absolute.<sup>44</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This article has clarified the unique nature of Tanabe's understanding of *jinen hōni*. *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, in which Tanabe made use of *jinen hōni* as a tool for his philosophy of religion, is a compilation of Tanabe's ideas from after the fall of 1944. Apart from Tanabe's personal “salvation” amid the tragedy of World War II, the defeat of Japan was a major incident that made Tanabe keenly realize the powerlessness of human beings and their reason. We human beings cannot be rational by ourselves—let alone make our society rational. This insight resulted from the events of World War II.

However, Tanabe could not give up on the pursuit of making society better even after recognizing the powerlessness and foolishness of human beings. “Ignorant and foolish sentient beings,”<sup>45</sup> while unable to be wise and competent, cannot abandon social life simply because they inevitably harm themselves or others. In particular, Tanabe thought that we human beings have to live as “social animals” in the sense that this phrase was understood in ancient Greece. Along these lines, Tanabe proposed that the construction of society becomes possible when our reason is mediated by the religious. In particular, in *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, Tanabe discusses social reconstruction according to the concept of *gensō ekō* that Shinran expounded. In this context, Tanabe uses the word *jinen hōni* to describe those of our actions in which the work of something that transcends us (i.e., Amida Buddha) manifests itself (i.e., Action as *gensō ekō*). Therefore, we can say that *jinen hōni* is Tanabe's expression for the

<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere, I have clarified why Tanabe reached the concept of *jinen hōni* from the viewpoint of the development of his philosophy and his concept of Action in Japanese. For further details, see Urai 2020b.

<sup>45</sup> CWS, vol. 1, p. 93.

only possible way, albeit a very difficult one, to make our social and cooperative lives more whole.

If that is the case, Tanabe's explanation of *jinen hōni* has elements in common both with Soga in its aspect of the "natural working of the Vow's power" and with Suzuki's "great function appears without abiding by fixed principles." In addition, Tanabe's explanation of *jinen hōni* is characterized by the treatment of its relationship with our social life, an aspect unexplored by Soga and Suzuki.

When we look at it as we have done in this article, we clearly see that salvation is nothing but a starting point for Tanabe. After that, there still remains a long way ahead of one in which to live well with others. In the words of Shin Buddhism, this refers to those who join "the truly settled of the Mahayana" (*Daijō shōjōshu* 大乘正定聚)—that is, those sentient beings who attain the conviction in this present lifetime that they will eventually attain buddhahood.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Tanabe's philosophy of religion shows us that we need the Great Compassion of the Absolute to live well with others as social beings.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- CWS      *The Collected Works of Shinran*. Translated by Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryuzu. 2 vols. Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanjisha, 1997.
- PM        Tanabe, Hajime. *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. Translated by Takeuchi Yoshinori, Valdo Viglielmo, and James W. Heisig. Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2016.
- SDZ      *Suzuki Daisetz zenshū* 鈴木大拙全集. 32 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1968–71.
- THZ      *Tanabe Hajime zenshū* 田辺元全集. Edited by Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 et al. 15 vols. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1963–64.
- Z         *Zangedō toshite no tetsugaku: Tanabe Hajime tetsugaku sen* 懺悔道としての哲学：田辺元哲学選 2. Edited by Fujita Masakatsu 藤田正勝. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2010.

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<sup>46</sup> CWS, vol. 1; Z, p. 153.

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